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Rethinking King Cotton: George W. Lee, Zora Neale Hurston, and Global/Local Revisions of the South and the Nation

It was in the Bodleian Library, while rummaging among the quaint and musty index papers of the Upper Reading Room, that I heard one capped and gowned librarian muttering to another, as with an air of offended dignity: "Writing on cotton! Why on earth should he want to write on such a subject as that?"

James A.B. Scherer, *Cotton as a World Power*

IN 1940, A U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE pamphlet titled *The Negro in American Agriculture* called "the story of the Negro in agriculture . . . a challenging chapter in the story of farming in America, a tale of impressive achievements and of great misery and need." It continues:

Agriculture means more to more American Negroes than does any other industry or occupation. . . . The welfare of most Negroes in the South rises and falls with the welfare of southern agriculture. The status of the Negro farmer is one of the major factors in the southern agricultural situation. It is of vital interest, not only to the South but to the entire nation. (4, 3)

In the 1930s and 1940s, Zora Neale Hurston and George W. Lee tell compelling and competing stories of the "Negro" in agriculture. To be sure, each narrates "impressive achievements" as well as "great misery

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and need.” Lee’s *River George* (1937) describes the record-setting cotton crop that protagonist Aaron George produces when he returns to his late father’s shares, for example, while Hurston’s novels and stories present black communities that, despite the racist and classist pogrom of early twentieth-century agriculture, affirm and sustain its members. At the same time, each narrates “great misery and need”: *River George* ends in Aaron’s graphic lynching, while Hurston’s work tends toward wholesale African American rejection of American agriculture: as she asks in *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), “Why must I chop cotton at all?” (345). What’s more, their works defy the relegation of “the status of the Negro farmer” within a regional or national circuit, for they contest American agriculture as solely national or local and instead acknowledge its global dimensions. While Aaron does not recognize that he is victim of the plantation, a transnational system far greater than he and fundamental in refusing him agency or equity, Hurston’s works embrace global consciousness, repudiating emplacement in and fealty to a world order that denies her characters autonomy and equity.

Indeed, both authors, from different positions, explore the problematic conflation of race and space under globalization. Aaron’s environmental imagination is demarcated by his economic relationship to the cotton he sharecrops for the enrichment of a global economic system—an untenable relationship that effects his enlistment in the U.S. Army during World War I and his final, fearful flight from his rural Mississippi homeplace to Memphis. Hurston, by fetishizing not cotton, but food crops—from green beans and citrus to potatoes and hogs—seeks to disrupt the global commodities system that founds and powers the “Ass-and-all of democracy” in “subjugating the dark world completely” (165) and thus envisions transformed black relationships to southern landscapes. Put simply, Lee’s and Hurston’s fetishization of cotton—one through the devastation of its presence, the other through the liberation of its absence—crystallizes the perplexing, debilitating, and alienating interchanges of globalization, race, and place.

Recent literary critical turns to the study of globalization make possible my argument that Lee and Hurston, through the image of cotton, express complex responses to “glocal” imaginations of place, race, and agriculture. As Wai Chee Dimock writes in her provocative *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (2006), “the

analytic adequacy of the sovereign state has been increasingly called into question,” thus requiring a theorization of

a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. These are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment—connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world. Active on both ends, they thread American texts into the topical events of other cultures, while also threading the long durations of those cultures into the short chronology of the United States. (3)

In Lee’s and Hurston’s work, cotton is the commodity and trope that “weav[es] in and out of other geographies,” that creates and fractures “kinship networks,” that structures inequitable “routes of transit.” Their texts problematize the environmental expression and consolidation of local versus global power structures. On one hand, their celebrations of the “local”—the romantic notion of immediate, self-sufficient, and sustainable community—articulate an important critique of wide-scale industrialization and its concomitant alienation and consumption. On the other hand, the panegyric of local cultures and environments masks the imbrications and interpenetrations of the “global” always already structuring and conditioning the “local.”¹

Consequently, their visions and countervisions extend and deepen critical imaginations of agriculture, environmental consciousness, and race, from the (un)confines of the American South to the “manywheres” of the “glocal” South.² For theorists of new southern studies, the site of cotton production itself—the plantation—renders visible the functions and dysfunctions of glocalization in American literature. Jon Smith argues that the South’s “legacy of colonial plantations . . . suddenly looks a lot like much of the rest of the hemisphere” (Introduction 121), as the American South becomes the largely brown-skinned Global South whose human, cultural, and environmental *raison d’être* is to serve the interests of the largely white-skinned global North. To fortify the apt claim that the South “suddenly looks a lot like much of the rest of the hemisphere,” Deborah Cohn and Smith point to the plantation as a site that exposes the tensions between colonialism and imperialism: “The plantation—more than anything else—ties the South both

to the rest of the United States and to the rest of the New World" (*Look Away!* 6). George B. Handley concurs: "What the plantation has left in its wake is a series of mutually concealed parallels of experience and history throughout Plantation America" (5).³

Yet it is not enough merely to posit experiential and historic parallels throughout Plantation America, as Hosam Aboul-Ela underscores in his criticism of "discourse that allows rhetorical parallels to create a sense of equality where profound spatial inequalities still predominate" (56–57). Contemporary ecocriticism and race theory provide a framework for particularizing the intersections of environment and race in the transnational construction and dissemination of the plantation. Charles W. Mills writes that "part of the purpose of the color bar/the color line/apartheid/jim crow is to maintain these spaces *in their place*, to have the checkerboard of virtue and vice, light and dark space, *ours* and *theirs*, clearly demarcated so that the human geography prescribed by the Racial Contract can be preserved" (48), a truth Robert Bullard documents sociologically and geographically in *Dumping in Dixie*. William Cronon and Giovanna Di Chiro theorize this disproportionate toxification and pollution of the communities of peoples of color by deconstructing Western myths of Eden and virgin wilderness. Because Western Edenic and wilderness narratives code ethnic minorities as wild and thus outside human culture, needing regulation or beseeching exploitation, "wilderness or Eden must be located where these 'toxic' or 'fallen' peoples are not. The Edenic notion of nature becomes, for many communities of color, a tool of oppression that operates to obscure their own 'endangered' predicaments" (Di Chiro 311). In the 1930s, the sociological narratives of Gunnar Myrdal, Arthur F. Raper, and Charles S. Johnson testify to the inseparability of widespread soil degradation and erosion, diminished biodiversity, racially and socioeconomically inequitable land distribution, and psychological oppression under the plantation system, just as contemporary postcolonial studies such as David Naguib Pellow's *Resisting Global Toxics* analyze the ecological, political, and societal affects of the creation of the "developing world" as the postmodern plantation of the "developed world." In the words of Ursula K. Heise, "Ecological issues are situated at a complex intersection of politics, economy, technology, and culture; envisioning them in their global implications requires an engagement with a variety of theoretical approaches to globalization, especially, for ecocritics, those

that focus on its cultural dimensions" (514). As this interrogation of race, place, and globalization in the work of Lee and Hurston aims to demonstrate, ecocriticism—especially when it embraces theorizations of environmental justice—provides the necessary framework for narrating and theorizing the deep connections between social difference and environmental identity, especially in a global context.⁴

And so we return to cotton and the apparatus that brings it forth, the plantation. Lee's and Hurston's reimagination of African American agricultural identity hinges on the commodification of the former. Because cotton is never consumed in situ and "always had a market," because it is "not perishable" and "tenants could not eat it," it is a global, and globalized, commodity (Hurt, *American Agriculture* 222). Yet *River George*'s response to cotton farming is local and therefore doomed; what Aaron George, the novel's protagonist, hopes to attain on the local level is made impossible on the global level. The white agrarian myth aims to mediate this problem by intensifying the local as a means of rarefying the global, a negotiation that, ironically, underscores the racial, global side of the equation. Lee's novel rails at archetypal notions of bucolic felicity, depicting instead an agricultural region where violence against black bodies is the norm. Though it calls on the nation to guarantee its promises, the novel's ending—emphasized in Hurston—insinuates the urgency of an alternative, more global, response.

Likewise, while the plantation—through its deceptive localization, its centralization of the lives of farmers and fieldworkers, and its romanticization of the social hierarchies that preserve and safeguard community "tradition" and "security"—manages to cloak itself in the protective robe of agrarianism, narrated and thematized in "plantation fiction," Lee and Hurston provide a forceful counternarrative.⁵ Their texts refuse to countenance racist ideologies that disparage African Americans' capacity to interact with their environment, crystallized in the cultivation of an almost sentimentalized place-centeredness. At the same time, their depiction of African Americans' rural experience—as deplorable as their urban experience, described in, for example, Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) or Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940)—de-astates nostalgic romanticizations of the "country" or the "folk." It is on this literary landscape that their texts undertake their deconstructions of local-global binaries, exposing the liabilities of the local and the exigencies of the global as a tenable site of resistance. Thanks to their

problematizations of “glocalization,” these texts reimagine raced, rural identity, reinstating it with both cultural and environmental agency and complexity.⁶

‘WE PUT THE COTTON IN THE GROUND’

Lee was born January 4, 1894, near Indianola, Mississippi, “in the heart of the Delta Country in a section where a large percent of the land was owned by Negroes” (Lee interview 17 April 1966; Tucker 3–4). Although his father, a minister, was one of those landowners, the family’s landholdings were short-lived. When Lee was three years old, his father died, and his mother, not knowing her rights, was unable to claim the property. The family worked as cotton sharecroppers for several years, memories of which Lee was anything but fond:

We tried to till the land as best we could for a period of time, but we found we could make no money at the end of the year with the few bales of cotton that we had made seemed to be just enough (so the landowner said) to pay the debts for food and upkeep so we lived on the borderline of mere subsistence for a number of years, sharecropping and living out of a little garden. (Lee interview 17 April 1966)

The family’s experience of cotton sharecropping mirrors that of other black families. White landowners take advantage of the black tenants’ subordinate position:

The plantation owners had the tenants to bring the cotton to the gin to be ginned and baled, and then the tenants went on back home without knowing the price of cotton per pound, or not knowing what the bale of cotton weighed, or what a bale of cotton brought. . . . At the end of the year these tenant farmers would go up to the commissary, and the bookkeeper would tell them they owed so much or they had made so much (seldom did he say they had made anything), but they would just have to take his word for what the situation was. They didn’t know what the cotton had been sold for. They didn’t know anything. . . . It was a highway robbery thing, and it was a method of slavery. (ibid.)

Escaping sharecropping was difficult; one could stay on one farm and struggle to get out of debt, try to move to a different farm or take a different job, or leave for the North. Lee's brother Abner, for example, took a job at an oil mill in town. But a run-in with a white plantation agent, who disputed use of the farm mule to travel back and forth to the mill job, forced the family off the land. With "too much disdain for field work ever to permit her children to remain on the land," Lee's mother moved her family to Indianola, where she found work washing and ironing and where Lee took a succession of jobs: grocery store clerk, house boy for a cotton planter and buyer, and dray driver (Tucker 5, 8–10).

Lee's post-sharecropping biography embodies the qualities of a renaissance man. In 1917, after completing high school and college at Alcorn A&M College, a black land-grant school in Lorman, Mississippi, Lee enlisted in the U.S. Army and fought in Europe in World War I, earning the rank of second lieutenant. Returning stateside after his honorable discharge in 1919, he moved to Memphis and became active in Republican politics as a patronage broker and party leader. He also began a successful career in insurance, starting as a sales agent for Mississippi Life and helping found the National Negro Insurance Association. His influence in Republican politics culminated in his making a seconding speech for the presidential nomination of Robert A. Taft at the party's 1952 national convention, and his career in business culminated in his ascension to the vice presidency of Atlanta Life, a multimillion-dollar company and one of the nation's largest black-owned companies. After a successful business career, honored political service, and wide-ranging philanthropy, he died in a car accident August 1, 1976, in Memphis (Lee interview 17 April 1966; Tucker 48–50, 53, 158–61, 200–09).

Lee's writing also gained him widespread notice. His experiences furnished him a host of subjects and audiences, and critics who discuss his works speak of their close relationship to his professional and political life. In particular, he testified throughout his life to the power of business to lift African Americans from poverty and helplessness: "Lee moved rather naturally from selling insurance to writing books; in both, the central theme was black pride," David M. Tucker states. "Since writing offered a medium for promoting the racial pride upon which black business thrived, George Lee took up the pen as a tool for creat-

ing profits" (105). His first work, *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began* (1934), became the first book by an African American advertised by the Book-of-the-Month Club. A pseudo-documentary of African American achievement that tells the stories of the famed Memphis street's fascinating characters, it garnered positive reviews in the *New Yorker*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, and the *New York Sun* (Clark 194). Lee was "goaded" to write *River George* in response to "arrogant intellectuals" who believed that he was "a one book author" whose "Beale St[reet] subject, and not the author[,] made the book." He chose to write about "the damnable sharecrop system of Mississippi"—"slavery under another name"—because "it had rankled in his stomach since childhood and he had always thought he would expose it if he could" (Interview, notes, 12 Oct. 1966). The novel received mixed reviews. His final work is *Beale Street Sundown*, a collection of short stories previously published in the *Negro Digest*, the *World's Digest*, and the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Though the book garnered little general notice, it gave him satisfying local attention, epitomized by the soubriquet "Boswell of Beale Street" (qtd. in Clark 195). For Edward D. Clark, Lee's final literary project mirrored his shift from racial "protest to accommodation . . . racial pride to folklore. . . . In these short narratives he painted scenes of Beale Street life which are much more works of art than they are social tracts" (195). Whereas Richard Wright turned away from the United States through expatriation, Lee wrote from within the system, ever a native son.

River George is significant for its depiction of racism and racial violence in American agriculture. Sterling A. Brown called it "the first novel by a Negro to deal specifically with the evils of sharecropping" (288), and Hugh M. Gloster categorizes it as "folk realism," a movement that he characterizes as "a growing interest in the rural South" during the 1930s and includes such writers as Mercedes Gilbert, George Wylie Henderson, and Hurston (234–35). In Aaron George, the novel develops a character Lee introduced in *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began*, tracing the college-educated African American sharecropper's tragic downfall, amid violent racism, in the early twentieth-century South. Aaron, after college, returns to Beaver Dam Plantation in Mississippi to inherit his dying father's shares. Thanks to coursework in soil chemistry in college, he produces a record crop of cotton, while whites scheme to keep the sharecroppers bound to the plantation. To earn

money enough to buy his mother, Hannah, and lover, Ada, a home off the plantation, Aaron takes a job at a nearby oil mill. Dozens of his fellow sharecroppers follow his example, prefiguring the great migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North throughout the twentieth century. After he leads a rally to push the landowners for a fairer system, the whites, fearful of rebellion, frame him for the murder of Fred Smith, Ada's white lover. But Smith, as the reader later learns, has not been killed, only injured; moreover, the wound is accidentally self-inflicted. Plantation officials and white leaders, though, send Smith away, to cement the illusion of the white man's death in the white community.

Pursued by a lynch mob, Aaron flees the Delta and hitches a train to Memphis. There, a woman takes him in as an "ease-man"; but, hunted by detectives hired by the plantation, he enlists in the U.S. Army and fights in World War I, convinced that military service will earn him whites' respect. After a disappointing visit to Harlem at the end of the war, Aaron travels to Vicksburg, Mississippi, and is nearly lynched for wearing his uniform, an allusion to the continued mistreatment that African American veterans found on their homecoming. The event precipitates his tragic fall: though he signs on as a Mississippi River roaster for a short time, he cannot resist the urge to return home to his family and lover. On the way, he wanders in a mist simultaneously environmental and psychological; thus debilitated, he stumbles upon a lynch mob and is summarily hanged.

In constructing Aaron as a would-be agrarian, *River George* posits agrarianism as a potentially reforming force. Cognizant of his education in agricultural science—"He had taken a course in soil chemistry in college and now he was applying what he had learned"—Aaron believes that he can translate his book learning into capital that will allow him to buy his mother and lover a farm off the plantation:

Even the short month in which he had worked showed the results of the fertilization he had given the land. And the swampy ten acres, which had never grown anything but weeds before, blossomed now as a result of his ditching and draining. It had always been regarded as waste land before, fit only for rabbit hunting during the short winter, but Aaron had learned that swamp bottoms were the richest land in the world. Once

you controlled the water, and limed the land to neutralize its acids, you could draw on the rich plant food which countless years of rotting vegetation had left behind and grow finer crops that anywhere on the uplands. (62)

That Aaron transforms the swampy wasteland into fertile field proves his agrarian worth, permitting him later to call for the rights he deserves. The project of spreading lime and digging an elaborate system of ditches—making agriculture scientific, pragmatic, and rational—testifies to both his brains and his brawn. In proving the value of the land he reclaims, he substantiates his own worth. Despite the cultural, historical, and environmental vestiges of the plantation that oppose him, Aaron seeks to escape sharecropping through cotton production, in pursuit of the American dream: a farm of his own, to support his lover and family. “I was thinking that maybe if we got a specially good crop—surely we’d get a little money on it,” Aaron tells his mother. “And if we saved, maybe in a year or so we could get a little farm of our own across the dam where we wouldn’t have to give everything we make to the white men at the store” (62). In the agrarian idiom, the dream of independence, evinced in the ownership of private land, is the lifeblood of the American experiment.

Although Aaron’s bumper crop of cotton signifies protest, it also serves to fasten him more tightly to the system that oppresses him. The more cotton he raises, the more money the whites take. Aaron’s private musings, reported by the omniscient third-person narrator, articulate the slippage between his act of protest and its unintended consequences, between “grim[ness]” and “satisfaction”:

By August Aaron’s fields were white with cotton which gleamed in the sunshine like fields of snow. He knew it was a better crop than any his father had ever raised there, better than any for miles around, and a grim look of satisfaction filled his eyes whenever he looked at it. You could not beat the white man with your fists or with words, but perhaps this was a way. (62)

He cannot vanquish whiteness by producing exponentially more whiteness, by inscribing the world white. Compared to his father’s previous best of seven bales, Aaron gins ten. He can speak only through his alteration and modification of the earth—an alteration that serves

the power structure he wishes to challenge. His pyrrhic victory in the cotton field functions only to yoke him more tightly to the problems he seeks to escape, for the more cotton the South produces, the further its price falls, thanks to domestic overproduction and foreign competition. Moreover, his alterations to the land underscore the racialization of place in the South and further limit his agency. Though Aaron's education facilitates his record breaking harvest, his success is unsustainable because this fecund land belongs to the white owner and its productivity depends on its hard treatment. Though he has access to "the richest land in the world," he cannot profit from it. His learning leads to despoliation; farming becomes extractive, drawing on natural deposits of fertility without concern for the future or its sustainability and maintained by white-owned technologies and stores. Put simply, Aaron cannot fathom the extent to which whites have encoded, with the signifiers of his oppression, the earth he seeks to reclaim.⁷

Nonetheless, *River George* positions Aaron as David to King Cotton's Goliath, deriving its force from lionizing Aaron as uncompromising in proving the system wrong, no matter the odds. The landscape that permits him to produce a record-breaking harvest ironically constrains his subjectivity and agency, and, paradoxically, it provides him a foundation on which to set forth an insurgent vision of black yeoman farmers. Such a vision might be the reason Gloster argues that *River George*, in its "[turn] from the cultured bourgeoisie of the metropolitan scene" to the "transcripts of folk life in the South," helps lay "a sounder and stronger foundation" for future African American literature (251). While *River George* might "[provide] a more realistic depiction of Negro tenant farmers in their relations with one another and with white members of the community" (238–39), it does so through its success in projecting a fantasy that at once encourages yet precludes radical change.

The novel sustains this fantasy through Aaron's ultimate realization that he must become a political agent who speaks the language of revolution, a language already framed by traditional agrarianism. His friend Lightning organizes a meeting of the sharecroppers, energized by their new knowledge of better paying jobs in town. Aaron speaks to the gathering, articulating a local, class-conscious, eco-political identity that stakes its protest in the land and its cultivation by African Americans: "They furnish the house, the land, the mules and the plows, while we put the cotton in the ground, cultivate it and pick it. We are supposed

to receive half of the returns on our crop, and the owners are supposed to furnish us with food and supplies until settlement time at the end of the season. But the settlement brings us nothing" (101). His declaration of action and agency—"we put the cotton in the ground"—redounds as an unequivocal assertion of the sharecroppers' claim to legitimacy and authority, a claim that, in contrast to the plantation economic system, locates real importance in the land, its productivity, and methods of cultivation, not just in its ownership. Aaron's articulation situates the whites as abrogating their duty, while the sharecroppers have more than fulfilled theirs—a claim actualized in Aaron's ten bales of cotton. In anchoring his revolutionary language in the national agrarian myth and in the localization of the national agricultural landscape, Aaron thus calls on the nation as a guarantor of reform.

Similarly, Lee—speaking in 1942, during the depths of World War II—maintains his faith in the capacity of the nation to fulfill its founding myth.

The negro knows no other flag; he speaks no other tongue than the American tongue. He is pleased to live under a government whose foundation is a Constitution conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. . . . Other countries may give him (the negro) more social freedom, but no other country will give him more economic liberty. For, after all, in what other country could a Booker T. Washington rise out of the womb of slavery and dip his pen in the blood and sweat of slaves and write into the curriculum of Time the greatest system of industrial education the world ever knew? ("Loyalty" n.p.)⁸

Lee's praise of Washington grows out of his lifelong faith in the power of economic participation to remedy racial discrimination, a belief premised on the motivation and capacity of American governance to extend to blacks the liberty and equality already guaranteed to whites. The South—"a land of strange paradoxes" (Lee, "Negro's Appraisal" 2)—threatens the nation's ideals, but hope springs eternal:

Now all who speculate on the future of democracy [must] look toward the river's black belt, where race prejudice often flows to the point of violent reaction. Those river-bottom shacks where

blacks and poor whites still hover in the midst of gloom are the testing rocks of democracy. The nation's essential life and vitality for the world's leadership will spread from this valley that the river built, if men of wide differences in thought, religion and skin color, can cooperate for the common good. (Lee, "Right Thing" 66).⁹

Should the United States bring freedom, democracy, and free markets to the Black Belt, just as it has brought democracy to Europe and Asia in the course of World Wars I and II, it can create a beachhead in the South and thus recreate itself in accordance with its stated ideals, "for the common good" of both America and the world. The path to a new world order, Lee underscores in these passages, begins in an agricultural landscape, in redeeming American agrarianism.

But the nation can fulfill neither Aaron's nor Lee's grand visions of regional/national liberty and justice, a failure crystallized in the positioning of Aaron's lynching at the conclusion of *River George*. A white mob so brutalizes Aaron's body that "it [is] impossible to say even whether it was the face of a man or a beast[,] . . . with no semblance of any human face in the broken mass of pulp" (274, 270). The brutality of Aaron's lynching speaks to the depths of his "violat[ion] of taboo" and to the urgency of the restoration of national "order" through the reinscription of local social organization as the embodiment of national values (Harris 11–12).¹⁰ Yet the community coalition effected by lynching also discloses the encroachment of transnational, global systems and conditions into the ostensibly autochthonous southern community. As Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck demonstrate in *Festival of Violence*, the greater a southern locality's reliance on cotton (a reliance fractured by the global commodification of cotton), the higher the incidence of lynching: "As King Cotton went, so went the region. Declining prices had serious consequences for all groups involved in the production of cotton. Rural blacks were the most vulnerable" (119, 139, 123–24). Lynching, as a communal enactment of local inclusion and exclusion, nonetheless simultaneously expresses the local enactment of global economic and social organization.

Indeed, the nation as an effective mode of resistance is always already compromised, provocatively and complexly under the sign of cotton—something Aaron fails to account for in constructing his revo-

lutionary eco-political identity. Cotton signifies “the world’s Golden Fleece; the nations are bound together in its globe-engirdling web,” James A.B. Scherer effuses (4).¹¹ In his economic interpretation, cotton signifies a unit of exchange that far exceeds the agency of its producers, thanks to its peculiar condition as the only major crop that is wholly exported from its sites of production:

Cotton, therefore, generates an enormous commerce and provides a medium of exchange that almost entirely takes the place of gold in the settlement of interstate and international balances. . . . Cotton, being practically imperishable and always convertible, possessed more of the attributes of a legal tender than anything produced by human labor except gold. . . . Speaking by and large, cotton may fairly be described as *the only natural monopoly of a world-wide necessity*; and it is this fact which explains its peculiar importance in the interdependence of trade. (Scherer 3–4, 388)

The commodity plays a central role in a romantic-imperialist narrative of commodity mobility and ethnic interpellation, paradoxical and debilitating in its enforcement of immobility and alienation of the black-South body that produces it in the first place:

Back and forth across the oceans the great steam shuttles ply, forever capitalizing the genius of Watt and Fulton and Whitney, as they weave “the warp and woof of the world’s civilization.” . . . Cotton cloth paves the way for Christianity in the jungles of the Dark Continent; to the savages of the Congo cotton cloth is more precious than ivory or gold. Under the midnight sun arctic dogs drag sleds laden with cotton goods. The condor and the eagle look down wonderingly upon pack-trains carrying the product of European cotton mills across the Andes. The yak goes burdened with cotton goods into Tibet. Godowns along Chinese streams are stored with cotton goods awaiting shipment, and to the upper reaches of the Yang-tse and Hoang-ho the native Chinese trader on his junk carries cotton clothes and garments to interior tribes. Burros laden with cotton goods from England and Germany pick their way across the moun-

tains of Mexico. The elephants of India and the camels of the Levant and Egypt carry cotton goods. (Scherer 356, 358)

Like Scherer, scholars of Lee's day recognized the increasingly complex globalization of cotton and analyzed its deleterious impacts on the southern plantation and its abject retainers. Charles S. Johnson, Edwin R. Embree, and W.W. Alexander discuss in *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy* (1935) the downgrading of the United States to merely "one of fifty cotton-growing countries in the world" and the rise of cotton in Africa, Australia, Asia, and South America (36–37). They hold out little hope for ameliorating the problems caused by the "erratic and fluctuating" prices of cotton on the world market, given the complexity of international trade and the uncertainty of global industrial development. What's more, the authors warn, the quality of American cotton has fallen, in large part thanks to southern soil erosion and degradation:

Not only are the world's supplies other than American increasing steadily, if slowly, in quantity, but also the great bulk of the new supplies is of a quality at least as good as all but the best American, and every one of the countries mentioned is doing what is can to produce the best cotton it is capable of growing, or to improve varieties formerly grown. (37–38)

Cotton's globalization, the authors suggest, unequivocally dismantles its localization.

In the end, Lee's vision of national redemption through explicit local agrarian resistance and reform cannot succeed because of the always already globalized condition of the signifier on which he founds his wistful narrative of change. The global commodification of cotton, always already implicit in his narrative, undercuts the efficacy of the nation as constructed in agrarian discourse. Instead, the nation figured in agrarian ideology becomes a distorting fiction that impedes and repels local resistance and local revolution. The plantation replicates and hones the structures of oppression and domination already successful in colonized nations, while cotton, its medium of exchange, reifies and reinforces those structures. Aaron's taking his stand in the cotton patch renders him powerless in the face of forces beyond his control, yoking him more tightly to the oversight and surveillance of those

better situated to intervene in those forces. Cotton, the agrarian gold standard, paradoxically renders agrarianism impossible, epitomized in African American mass migration that leaves the land uncultivated: "Throughout the Delta plantations, up and down the river, the movement had spread until hundreds of cabins were empty and thousands of acres of land were untilled" (*River George* 270).

‘WHY MUST I CHOP COTTON AT ALL?’

Unlike Lee's *River George*, Zora Neale Hurston's fiction articulates a protest that rejects the system it challenges. Her fiction constructs an alternative idiom to agrarianism, refusing the immobility of localization through symbolic reorganization (the pear tree, green beans, oranges and grapefruit, and shrimp). By privileging mobility, Hurston activates a global imagination. Rather than countenance African Americans' fealty to King Cotton, her novels depict African Americans engaged in diversified agriculture outside white surveillance. Rather than pine for a farm of one's own, her novels celebrate migration between farms. Thus they counter-navigate the "tight places" of African American symbolism, undermining the primacy of the local and complicating concepts of the global. Thus Hurston recuperates African Americans' relationships to their environment even as she revises the elision of bodies of color in industrial, global agriculture, offering a liberatory response to the conundrums Lee articulates.

The significance of the pear tree and beans in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and of citrus and shrimp in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* consists in their difference from cotton. Asking in *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), "Why must I chop cotton at all? Why fix a class of cotton-choppers?" (345), Hurston discards cotton outright in her fiction. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, sharecroppers Ned and Amy Crittenden rage at each other after Beasley, their white landlord, cheats them out of fair compensation for the surplus of cotton they have produced: "Me and you and all de chillum done worked uh whole year. Us done made sixteen bales uh cotton and ain't even got uh cotton seed to show" (6). In language that mirrors *River George's*, Amy rails at the coercive power of cotton to bind them to the operations of slavery. That John Crittenden, whom the novel shows to be a skillful and adept farmer, leaves agriculture to become a preacher finalizes the text's condemnation of not just sharecropping, but cotton too.¹²

Instead, Hurston's texts luxuriate in the sensual appeal of food, not fiber. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, John and wife Lucy, a tobacco and peanut farmer's daughter, delight in moving to Florida, where "the warmth, the foliage, the fruits all seemed right and as God meant. . . . The smell of ripe guavas was new and alluring but somehow did not seem strange" (109). Similarly, *Seraph on the Suwanee* centers on Florida's "citriculture," supplemented by "cracker" Jim Meserve's successful shrimping business. Likewise, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Logan Killicks raises potatoes and wants to expand production to take advantage of a bull market, while Janie and Tea Cake find happiness picking string beans on the "muck," an area "in de Everglades round Clewiston and Belle Glade where dey raise all dat cane and string-beans and toma-tuhs" (27):

To Janie's strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new. Big Lake Okechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything. Weeds that did well to grow waist high up the state were often ten feet tall down here. Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. Wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too. (128–29)

Like Jonah's John and Lucy, Janie finds a "new" landscape, an ecological and social "contact zone" (to borrow Mary Louise Pratt's helpful theorization [6–7]) that, rather than iterating and enforcing inequalities of power, creates spaces of opportunity and redefinition. Though Carl Kelsey in 1903 professes that alluvial land "easily raises twice the cotton of other soils" (19), the rich Everglades soil signifies in terms of human sustenance: beans, sugar cane, tomatoes, and wheat. Indeed, Hurston's depiction of the muck, despite its acquiescence to agribusiness, nonetheless presents a prototypical vision of Eden that includes, not excludes, persons of color.

Freeing the muck's rich soils from the sapping ecological and cultural effects of cotton presents an opportunity to imagine a counter-hegemonic aesthetic. More than the image of the pear tree, the symbol of the green bean functions as a rejection of racist ideologies that deny African Americans a place on the land. Not only does the green bean reinforce the potential of the garden as a gendered space of resistance

(as Alice Walker forcefully posits); it underscores the potential of non-cotton based agriculture to function as a site of effective psychological and racial resistance. Janie's and Tea Cake's affirmative experiences on the muck rebut a pernicious rhetoric that held that African Americans lacked the mental capacities and fine motor skills needed to raise vegetables and livestock, a rhetoric Kelsey bluntly recapitulates in his statement that "the adaptability of cotton to the Negro is almost providential. It has a long tap root and is able to stand neglect and yet produce a reasonable crop. The grains, corn and cane, with their surface roots, will not thrive under careless handling" (32). Hurston provocatively reverses Kelsey's formulation, amply demonstrating African Americans' adaptability to a variety of environments, economies, and societies. What's more, she encourages a counter-hegemonic imagination of a subjugated race freed from the anachronistic and annihilating methods of cotton production, in light of hypotheses circulating during the 1930s and 1940s asserting that updated practices and technologies could free large swaths of the South from cotton production even as it could emancipate millions of laborers from cotton cultivation.¹³

That she situates her characters in relation to truck farming serves to contradict white clichés of blacks' inability to provide for themselves. Parroting these clichés, Kelsey cites a Tuskegee Institute catalog: "If [blacks] have any garden at all, it is apt to be choked with weeds and other noxious growths. With every advantage of soil and climate, and with a steady market if they live near any city or large town, few of the colored farmers get any benefit from this, one of the most profitable of all industries." He goes on to contend that "as a matter of fact they care little for vegetables and seldom know how to prepare them for the table," preferring instead to indulge their "proverbial" "fondness for coon and 'possum" (31), a view later institutionalized in U.S. Department of Agriculture bulletins such as "Negro Farm Families Can Feed Themselves: A Handbook for Teachers" (1942). Hurston's depiction of agricultural diversification across her fiction unequivocally counters such damaging ideologies, for it envisions a mode of human interaction with the environment that undoes the psychological effects of cotton cultivation: "Cotton growing, as any one-sided agriculture—if it is not lifted up by high techniques to a level where intelligence is constantly used and prosperity secured— . . . 'limits interests . . . limits spiritual growth, makes people narrow, single-grooved, helpless.' It invites child

labor and causes retardation in schools" (Myrdal 233). To imagine cultivation of crops other than cotton as liberating is to work against the spatialization of the South in subjugation to "the trinity of cotton, tenancy, and poverty" and to militate against the relegation of African American lives within "tightly configured boundaries marked by racism more than fences or county lines" (Hurt, *African American Life* 1).¹⁴

The power of Hurston's revolutionary imagining derives from her seemingly paradoxical idealization of mobility and disemplacement. Janie moves from farmstead to farmstead to protocorporate farmstead, propelled by a psychological quest for love and community as well as by environmental catastrophe. *Seraph on the Suwanee* follows Jim and Arvay Meserve from turpentine camps and citrus groves to, ultimately, deterritorialization: deep-sea fishing and its attendant nomadic community. The specter of African Americans' mass depopulation of the South haunts *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; their respective characters adopt a carefree attitude toward landownership: "God made de world but he never made no hog outa me tuh go 'round rootin' it up," John declares in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (149), while Janie confesses upon her loveless marriage to Logan that she "could throw ten acres of [dat ole land] over de fence every day and never look back to see where it fell" (23–24). Walker and Ted Ownby theorize such blasé attitudes toward land in the context of the United States' defaulting on its promise to African Americans. Walker writes that community, not land, is "what the black Southern writer inherits as a natural right" (17), while Ownby frames Hurston's choice not to "[wrestle] much with ideas about the Chosen People, the Promised Land, or Reconstruction-era ideas of a right to land" in the dual context of the failure of "the hope of landowning . . . so important to earlier generations of African Americans" and of her witnessing of "the largest South-to-North African American migration in history" (48). Walker's and Ownby's formulations mine a common vein: the failure of the territory to ground and sustain the ideals and promises iterated and reiterated thereon.

Put another way, Hurston's privileging of mobility and migrancy evinces a turn to the global, away from the national, as a means of effecting meaningful local change. In a sense, her autobiographical recognition that "all geography was within me" (*Dust Tracks* 115) anticipates what Sara Blair, some seventy years later, calls "the effects of dislocation, disembodiment, and localization that constitute contemporary social

orders" (545): a jarringly embodied fusion of a local imagination framed by an incipient appreciation of a global imagination, an amalgamation that in turn effects a global consciousness that undermines the efficacy of a local consciousness. Hurston's global imaginary centers on the collusion of "developed" nations—the global North, whose provisions and promises of freedom and justice ostensibly are self-evident—opposed to those very ideals in "developing" nations, given the pervasiveness of "the idea of human slavery [that] is so deeply ground in that the pink toes can't get it out of their system" (*Dust Tracks* 343):

Have we not noted that not one word has been uttered about the freedom of the Africans? On the contrary, there have been mutterings in undertones about being fair and giving different nations sources of raw materials there? The Ass-and-All of democracy has shouldered the load of subjugating the dark world completely. . . . Jim Crow is the rule in South Africa, and is even more extensive than in America. More rigid and grinding. No East Indian may ride first-class in the trains of British-held India. Jim Crow is common in all colonial Africa, Asia, and the Netherlands East Indies. . . . So why this stupid assumption that "moving North" will do away with social smallpox? ("Crazy" 166–67)

Hurston's global consciousness offers a new vision of America, for it exposes the implicit functioning of agrarianism to obscure and elide non-local perspectives. In her work, migration embodies a globally-conscious response to local oppressions and dominations, belying a strategic reluctance to put faith in the usefulness of any nation to secure individual liberty and fairness. Her characters refuse to become natural resources, ripe for exploitation, given their knowledge that human modes of relating to place encode and disseminate social and cultural orders. Though an agrarian perspective embeds these social and cultural orders in a bucolic local milieu, Hurston's totalizing imagination undoes agrarianism's sedating nostalgia by depicting its unseemly operations elsewhere. Put simply, she chooses decentralization and deterritorialization, signified in the figure of the unemplaceable horizon—"the most interesting thing that I saw," pleading with her to "walk out to [it] and see what the end of the world was like"—out of her awareness of the limitations of "home" (*Dust Tracks* 36).

CODA

A half-century later, Hurston's question—"So why this stupid assumption that 'moving North' will do away with social smallpox?"—has been reframed and reinvigorated, as critics and theorists work toward reimagining interpenetrations of a newly theorized "global South" and a globalizing world order. Given the agricultural and ecological framework of conquest, colonization, chattel slavery, and modernization, Lee's and Hurston's texts historicize ongoing movements toward the global South. *River George's* predisposition toward localism—local habitation, local community, local resistance—rejects racist allegations of African Americans' agricultural incompetence; Aaron's dream of a farm of his own counters bigoted (and thus self-serving) assertions that "Negroes are 'attached to the soil' much less than whites" (Myrdal 244). But his salvific faith in cotton farming comes at a cost: monocultures such as cotton deplete the soils they are planted in; become more susceptible to pests and erosion and thus require greater inputs of pesticides, herbicides, and labor; and encourage industrialized cultivation techniques that rely on questionable technologies and further trap farmers in cotton production. Denouncing cotton, Hurston's work offers an alternative subjectivity via mobility and migrancy, a subjectivity constructed within a global consciousness suppressed in *River George*. These modalities of mobility and migration gesture toward a complex view of a local environment in dialogue with a global environment, imagining the myriad ways in which the two fields derive from, condition, and structure one another. Taken together, Lee's and Hurston's texts rebuff tendencies to deflate the complexities of raced subjectivity in agriculture and environmentalism. Consequently, they offer a means to envision more richly, and empathize with, farmworkers of color, at home and abroad, who—contrary to transnational agribusiness sloganeering—feed and clothe the world, whose "foreign" labor makes "domestic" habitation possible. To rephrase Baker, their literary formulations problematize the "tight place" of the South as one that paradoxically signifies the world over. Put simply, in its problematization of region and nation, local and global, the post-plantation South is not yet post-plantation—and certainly not merely "south."

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NOTES

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1. See also Kaplan; Pease; and Pryse.

2. Speth defines “glocal” as an emerging condition of postnationality: “The big nation-state, it has been said, is too little for the big things and too big for the little things. ‘Glocalization’ is emerging, with action shifting to local and global levels. In many places, especially in Europe, one can see psychological disinvestment in the nation-state and the strengthening of local and global citizenship” (197).

3. Similarly, Cohn links the U.S. southern plantation to the South American plantation, for the latter and its “various Spanish American manifestations (e.g., the *hacienda* and the *latifundio*; in the case of Brazil, the *Casa Grande*)” represent “a fundamental paradigm structuring social organization and relations” (Smith and Cohn 6). Handley continues: “Plantation discourse, always dependent on structures of colonialism, wedded itself to the growth of U.S. imperialism after emancipation, and therefore the stark distinctions between Caribbean and U.S. cultures that emerged in the twentieth century are, in fact, alienated cousins, as it were, of the same plantation family” (8). See also Johnson, whose *The Shadow of the Plantation* (1934) presents a complex rereading of the plantation that simultaneously acknowledges spatial inequalities. Alongside Myrdal’s and Raper’s sociological narratives, Johnson’s text remaps the South as a bio-historical region centered on the plantation, whose operations effect and consolidate widespread social, cultural, and environmental damage, especially for African Americans: “The plantation in theory was a capital investment for large-scale production under a continuing routine. Its purpose was not the encouragement of peasant proprietorship. The social relations, labor, mentality, and discipline fostered by it are at the same time reflected in its surviving forms and traditions, and in the continuing selection and molding of its tenant types. It demands an unquestioning obedience to its managerial intelligence; it demands the right to dictate and control every stage of cultivation; it cannot and does not tolerate a suggestion of independent status. Those Negro tenants who have in spirit revolted against its implication, or who have with praiseworthy intent sought to detach themselves from its grip by attaining an independent status, have felt the full force of its remaining strength. Nothing remains but to succumb or to migrate” (127). Opposed to “peasant proprietorship,” the literal linchpin of Jeffersonian democracy and the figurative underpinning of Vanderbilt Agrarianism, the plantation mobilizes and sustains itself through social, economic, and political control and alienated “managerial” sovereignty over human-environment interactions. The effect of such opposition consists in widespread soil degradation and erosion, diminished crop diversity, racially and socio-economically inequitable land distribution, and psychological oppression. For discussions of the transformation of

the U.S. South into the Global South, see Cobb and Stueck; Cohn; O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order* and *Placing the South*; Peacock; Peacock, Watson and Matthews; and Smith and Cohn.

4. Following Wallace and Armbruster's invocation, many scholars have pursued in earnest theorizations of the place of the environment in African American literature and culture. Ecocriticism's multicultural imperative stems from the paradigm of environmental racism, helpfully articulated by Myers: "The ethnocentric outlook that constructed 'whiteness' over and against the alterity of other racial categories is the same perspective that constructed the anthropocentric paradigm at the root of environmental destruction. . . . Euroamerican racism and alienation from nature derive from the same source and result in the joint and interlocking domination of people of color and the natural world" (5, 15). Like Myers's work, that of Light, Bennett, and Stein also targets African American literature. Light critiques "the general legacy of the depiction of racial others and nature itself as uncivilized and thus unworthy of equal moral consideration" (137). Bennett, challenging Dixon, argues that African American literature destabilizes prevailing conventions of "the universal appeal of 'unspoiled' nature" because it "express[es] a profound antipathy toward the ecological niches usually focused on in ecocriticism: pastoral space and wilderness" (208). And Stein draws on the fiction of Hurston and Alice Walker to oppose the "negative identification of black women with lower nature" (20–21) and to reveal "animistic visions of human/natural collectivity and kinship that contest the unequal racial divisions of the Jim Crow South" (21). These scholars' focus on African American culture has energized the development of environmental justice criticism in ecocriticism. Buell for one credits the emergence of multiethnic "ecopopulism" for "the activism of nonelites, the emphasis on community, and an 'anthropocentric' emphasis on environmentalism as instrument of social justice as against an 'ecocentric' emphasis on caring for nature as a good in itself" (33). Similarly, Carr's collection presents a more ethnically and racially engaged and attentive feminist ecocriticism through ecocritical readings of Asian American, African American, and Chicana texts: "One of the major axioms guiding production of this anthology is that ecocriticism must practice multiculturalism as it attends closely to issues of environmental justice" (20). Finally, see also Harvey; and Yaeger.

5. See Ladd; and MacKethan. For discussions of agrarianism, see the Vanderbilt Agrarians (Twelve Southerners); Bingham and Underwood; and Murphy. In support of agriculture as the region's preeminent vocation, the Agrarians, in *I'll Take My Stand* and afterward, call for what we now would term an environmentally-friendly relationship to nature, given the basis of their anti-industrialist screed on their disgust for industrialization's transformation of nature from subject of the arts to object of extraction and commodification. But their prescient calls for environmental sustainability rest on diametrically opposing, and potentially ecologically damaging, views of the kind of "culture of the soil" that should be privileged and perpetuated. While the Agrarians' pastoralism encodes, in postcolonial terms, a subaltern critique of the dispossessed South's oppression by the powerful North, it functions nonetheless to reenergize myths of white masculine supremacy, thus rel-

egating the very bases of southern dispossession and alienation—white racism and longstanding crimes against nature—to cultural and social irrelevance.

6. Richardson and Baker likewise problematize the interstices of globalization, race, and space. Richardson, answering Mae Henderson's 1996 call for "global theories of transnational culture [that] can elucidate our understanding of black cultural practices within the contexts of various and specific locations" (66), laments in 2003 that "until recently, black identities had received scant study within the discourses of globalization": "This is ironic when we consider the historic centrality of black identities in the making of modernity. . . . I believe myself that the contemporary meditative role of a historically abject and marginal blackness in the global arena is also helpful for understanding and beginning to theorize ways in which the South in the United States, in light of its historical national abjection, is similarly serviceable as a paradigm for processing cultural flows and formations within a global context" ("Southern Turns" 559, 558). In analyses of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play* (1981), she demonstrates how "geographies of exclusion" ("Charles Fuller's" 7) give rise to problematic intranational and transnational articulations of blackness. Complementarily, Baker argues that the vexatious locations of "tight spots" and "tight spaces" encode the cultural, political, and geographical consequences of "*the always ambivalent cultural compromises of occupancy and vagrancy, differentially effected by contexts of situations: that is, Who moves? Who doesn't?*" (69). For Baker, such "tight spots" symbolize the simultaneously cultural and environmental problematics of "southern agrarian abjection" as a locus of "global modernity" (87, 84).

7. Aaron's agricultural education reinforces his inferiority and impotence. The Morrill Act of 1862, which created state universities dedicated to teaching agricultural and mechanical subjects to white students, was extended to African Americans in 1890. Black land-grant universities, called "1890s," sought to combine industrial, agricultural, and mechanical education with "racial uplifting" (Mayberry 3–4). But the "1890s" faced chronic, systematic underfunding; for whites, the specter of independent black farmers threatened the supremacy of cotton agriculture, portended black landownership, and promised black political empowerment through black self-sufficiency and community organization. Yet the coupling of black labor with agricultural education satisfied some whites, for coupling "practice" with "precept" served to disabuse blacks of "the idea that education meant freedom from labor" (Kelsey 71).

8. Lee's witnessing, in the 1950s, of cotton growers' wholesale importation of Mexican laborers to drive down agricultural wages tested his faith in the nation, a faith restored when he availed himself of U.S. Rep. B. Carroll Reece (R–Johnson City, Tenn.): "The people who came all the way from Mexico were getting more a hundred for cotton than the Negroes, who were citizens of the country I recited many other incidents in which the Negro had made tremendous contributions to America, . . . and that in spite of this, grandsons of these people who left their footprints of blood on the snows of Valley Forge were being discriminated

against for Mexicans who had come to ‘reap without having sown’” (Lee Interview 17 May 1966).

9. “The Right Thing to Do” appears to be the manuscript of a novel Lee was working on, and the main character, “John Carter,” serves as a conduit for cultural and social messages Lee articulated elsewhere.

10. Harris argues that “lynching and burning rituals reflect a belief, on the part of whites, in their racial superiority” and express the necessity of “symbolic punishment” in unified white defense of the “white world view”: “Symbolic punishment becomes communal because the entire society has been threatened” (11–12).

11. Scherer underscores the signal importance of cotton in the early twentieth century: “The Great War brought home to the public mind as nothing else could have done the knowledge that this vegetable fleece is really golden, and that its golden values are so interwoven with the solidarity of mankind as to depend to a peculiar degree for their stability on the maintenance of an unbroken network of international trade” (2–3). See W. Smith and Cothren; Wilkinson; and Yafa.

12. The Crittendens’ rejection of cotton reflects Hurston’s description of that of her father’s: “John Hurston, in his late twenties, had left Macon County, Alabama, because the ordeal of share-cropping on a southern Alabama cotton plantation was crushing to his ambition. There was no rise to the thing” (*Dust Tracks* 12).

13. See O.W. Wilcox, who theorized that applying “the most productive methods now known” could result in equal productivity on one-sixth the land cultivated by one-fourth the number of farmers (qtd. Myrdal 264).

14. Property ownership in the postbellum South spatialized the workings of racism, Raper claims: “The Negro buys land only when some white man will sell it to him” (121–22).

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